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BREAKING JAIL; A WAR WITHOUT TRUCE

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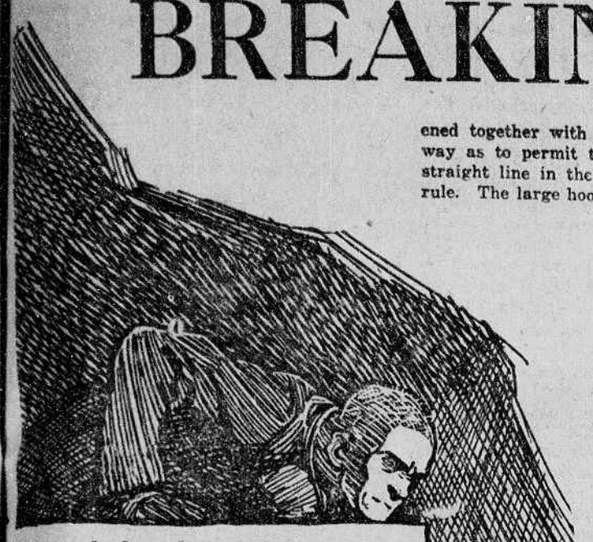
Drawings by J. Norman Lynd



He scarcely breathes until he is sure that the guard is gone.

AFTER fifteeen years' constant association with thousands of criminals of every type, I can heartily agree with a writer on the war who said: "There is nothing that men will not attempt —and do." If there were such a thing as "doing the impossible" I believe that prisoners of all classes would find a way to do it.

I doubt if there is any place on earth, even in war, where there is such a constant battle of wits as that which exists between prisoners and their keepers. Every hour of every day, year in and year out, prisoners in every institution in the world, from the small county jails to the enormous penitentiaries which are practically cities in themselves, are engaged in a never-ending struggle to outwit their keepers. The fact that out of the hundreds of escapes attempted only one or two succeed is in itself a tribute to the watchfulness of the prison officials. Their very lives depend on such vigilance, as perhaps 25 per cent of the escapes planned contemplate the murder of some of the keepers to insure their success. It goes without saying, however, that the officers have every advantage. They have bars, bolts, locks and stone walls to help them keep the prisoners from escaping, while the prisoners must find some flaw in this armor or think of some scheme to render it ineffective.

The One Big Duty Is, Keep Them Inside

The fact is that new prison officials, by an almost invariable process of evolution, come to feel that their only duty is to see that prisoners do not escape. In spite of this, I doubt if there is a prison or jail in the world from which prisoners have not escaped. Nor do I believe such a one will ever be built. For the tricks and schemes and uncanny mechanical skill which prisoners use, the courage and resourcefulness which they display, and the ant-like patience with which they execute their plans for a "getaway," would get them far along the road to success if applied in a proper direction.

It is night—the time when most escapes are attempted. Now the number of officers is reduced to a minimum; on city streets there are fewer people and on country roads pedestrians may be avoided entirely. In the Federal penitentiary at Leavenworth the amiable Dick Osborne, author already of half a dozen successful escapes, is working with his characteristic ingenuity and determination on the final preparations for a new "getaway." For five months—not too long a time when you still have twelve years to do—he has been perfecting his plans, bit by bit, under the very eyes of the prison officials. And at last, with the aid of some strips of leather, a small file, some staples and a hook, he is ready to make the four long dashes to freedom which must be accomplished before he will even be on the outside of the prison walls. First, he must get out of his cell; second, he must reach the top of the cell block, three or four tiers or flights of stairs up; third, he must bridge the distance of thirty-five feet between the top of the cell block and the real ceiling of the building, a gap which all modern prisons have just in order to frustrate such escapes, and fourth, he must get through the trap door, which is his objective, to the roof.

Prison Architects Make Escape Difficult

In modern prisons the cells are not just inside the walls of the prison building. They are set in a separate structure which is known as a cell block, and which is built in the center of the cellhouse about fifteen or twenty feet away from the interior walls, so that if a prisoner should get out of his cell he must still get out of the cellhouse, the windows and doors of which are barred.

To escape from his cell was easy for Dick. With the prisoners' first aid, the inevitable small saw which Dick hid during the day in the pipe of his washbowl (holding it there by tying it with a scrap of twine to the little cross bar), he had worked on the bars of his cell each night, stopping at the approach of the "screw" (prison slang for guard), and beginning again the moment he felt secure. As for the rest——

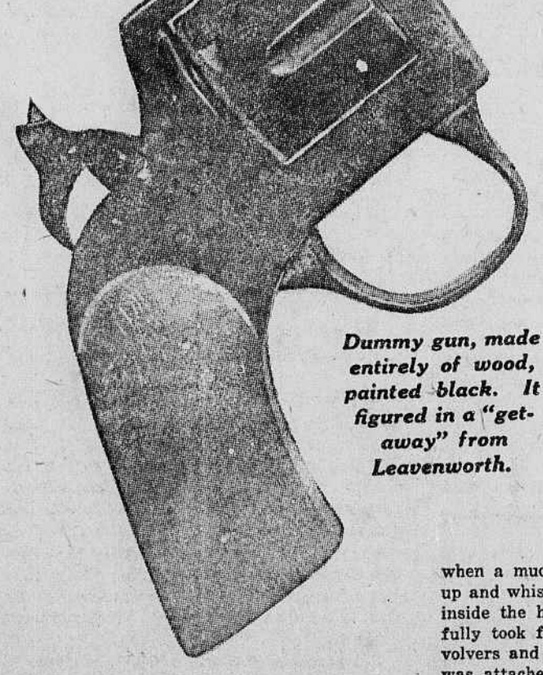
Dick worked in the shoe and harness shop of the penitentiary under the eye of a foreman and a guard on an elevated platform where it was not easy to walk off with things. Yet he had gradually stolen about two dozen thongs of heavy leather, each eighteen inches long, several dozen small staples and a piece of rope about forty feet in length. To these he added a large hook, which he picked up on the grounds of the institution while some building operations were in progress.

The ends of the thongs of leather he fastened together with a small staple in such a way as to permit them to be opened into a straight line in the manner of a carpenter's rule. The large hook was attached to the last thong and a drawstring ran along the entire length to keep it rigid. Closed it was eighteen inches long, but when unfolded and made rigid it had a length of about thirty-six feet. While making this queer contrivance Dick kept it tied to his leg.

On this particular night of which I speak all is ready for the break to liberty. A vigorous wrench finally severs the bars which have been filed to a fine thread. Dick listens and waits until he feels sure that the guard is at the other end of the cellhouse, then cautiously, very cautiously, he lets himself out of his cell on to the balcony faintly lighted by one dim light. Another period of listening. There are two ways to the top of the cell block, one by the staircase and one by perilously and slowly climbing up the tiers, balcony by balcony, until the top is reached. Which shall he take? Just one moment Dick hesitates. Then comes an infinitesimal sound. No doubt made by the guard's "sneaks." Perhaps he is not so far away as Dick thought. The staircase means quick discovery. So Dick begins to climb the tiers.

Stopping a hundred times to peer through the dim light and to listen with ears strained to every sound, he at last reaches the top of the cell block. Now to bridge the thirty-five-foot gap which stretches between him and the trap door in the ceiling. Very gently he removes the leather contraption from his leg and opens it to its full length. A sound. The "screw" is making his rounds. As quickly as possible with the maintenance of absolute silence Dick lowers himself until he is perfectly flat on the top of the cell block, his leather ladder flat beside him. He scarcely breathes until he is sure that the guard is gone. Then he rises, takes a careful grip on the leather ladder, and with a cautious movement sends the hook whirling up to the ceiling, where—oh, magic luck!—it catches a firm hold on a projection near the trap door.

Now for the third lap. Up the narrow band of leather Dick warily works, his teeth set, ears strained and eyes on the hook. Slowly, foot by foot, up the queer ladder he crawls.



Dummy gun, made entirely of wood, painted black. It figured in a "getaway" from Leavenworth.

Excitement beads his forehead with perspiration and makes his hands stick to the leather. Up another foot. Another. And another. He is nearing his goal. A sound! Or did he imagine it? Will he have to slide quickly back to the top of the cell block and hide until he may start the ascent again? He stops, listens, tries to pierce the gloom. . . . He starts to climb again. He is almost at the top. He makes a quick attempt to reach it in one move. His hand slips. He makes a convulsive effort to catch himself, fails, falls with a startling crash that awakens every prisoner in the place and—immediately begins to think of the possibility of trying again. A few months later sees him again on his way to freedom, and this time he is out and away.

With few exceptions, one of the cardinal rules of the administration of every prison is that no guns are permitted within the walls. In the vast majority of cases only the guards on the walls and in the towers are armed with guns, never those inside who come in direct contact with the prisoners. The possession of one or two guns within the walls upon more than one occasion has enabled prisoners to effect an escape. If the guards carry guns the prisoners, being greatly superior in numbers, can seize them, and, using the officers as shields against the fire of the guards on the walls and in the towers, can quite easily effect an escape.

Several years ago one of the Federal prisons had just such a "getaway." Twenty-six prisoners walked out at this time, although they had but two revolvers. At a signal a group of them in the yard overpowered several guards. Holding the guards before them as shields, they ran through the main building to the front door and pointing their guns at the guard stationed there demanded that he open the door. To have fired at them would have jeopardized the lives of the guards, "the interference." Needless to say, the door was opened and the prisoners marched out. They still had to get by an outside tower, however, where an armed guard was stationed. To their surprise, this guard opened fire. They returned it with the stolen guns and the guard dropped dead. Abandoning their human shields, the erstwhile prisoners "beat it" through the gates and scattered.

The worst class among the prisoners are continually making efforts to secure firearms. They cultivate the friendship of prisoners about to be released, particularly those of weak will, and try to induce them to maneuver firearms or saws to them or to assist them in some way from the outside to escape. The bolder, more determined prisoners usually turn to "prison simples" for this aid. "Prison simple" is the name given by their comrades to those inmates whose minds, not any too strong to begin with, develop what is known among prison physicians as "prison psychosis." This is a state of mind arising from the mental inactivity and monotony of their daily lives. It is expressed by a growing tendency to invest each tiny circumstance or happening in their constricted sphere with an importance entirely out of proportion to its real value. Prisoners are not alone in this. It is common to all groups of persons who live cramped, monotonous lives. Among prisoners it is a favorite indoor sport to play on the credulity of these simple ones by filling them with all sorts of fantastic, imaginary tales and watching the effect. But it is to these "prison simples," as said, that the wiser heads turn for dupes to assist them to escape.

One Sunday afternoon about two years ago I was sitting on the porch of the deputy warden's home at one of the country's big prisons when a much agitated "outside trusty" came up and whispered that he would like to see us inside the house. We went in and he carefully took from his blouse two enormous revolvers and a box of 100 cartridges, to which was attached a small slip. On the slip was written a little note signed "Success," wishing the intended recipient all the luck in the world. "Old Calamity" (prison slang for deputy warden) was not surprised. It was exactly what he had been expecting for months, and was the very reason that this particular prisoner had been made an "outside trusty." He had been set to watch for some guns to be "planted" on the prison farm, the deputy having known through the prison "underground" that one of his "hard-boiled guys" had been cultivating the friendship of a "simple" whose term would soon expire. The "trusty" who found the guns was "doin' it all," as the convicts say of a "lifer." He had previously been of assistance in checkmating similar plots, and I understand that efforts are being made to secure his release. I do not care to give his name. He would not be exactly popular among the prisoners if his part in these transactions were known.

A new and original scheme to get hold of a gun was attempted recently in a prison in Kansas. This institution had what is known as a "gun gallery" in the cellhouse, a narrow gallery running around the wall. Gun galleries are purposely built high and away from the cell block, so that prisoners cannot get to the armed guards who patrol them. In this institution there was a space of forty feet from the galleries running around the cells to the gun gallery on the wall. It would be impossible to imagine a gun inside the cellhouse in a safer position. But the prisoners, to whom everything is vulnerable until proved otherwise, planned to overcome this difficulty by lassoing the guard, dragging him off the gallery and seizing his gun. This could have been accomplished easily, as some of the prisoners were cowboys and thoroughly familiar with a rope. The plot led to the building of a grating around the gun gallery to protect the guard from prisoners locked in cells forty feet away.

But the more brainy prisoner is by no means dismayed when he finds his enforced home so "airtight" as to make the smuggling of guns practically impossible. Realizing that the effect of a gun, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, he devotes his time to the making of phony, or dummy guns.

You would never think, to look at the quiet, undersized, bespectacled Murdock, that here was a man with the brains to conceive an original and ingenious escape and with the courage and force to lead it. The officials didn't either, although they are not so often fooled by a pleasant exterior. They realize that there are others like the "mildest mannered man who ever scuttled ship or cut a throat," and, as a rule, they don't take chances. Now, I know Murdock well, and I don't believe he would do either of these things to a ship or a throat, but he could no more help using his brains than he could help breathing. When he informed Hewitt, Kating, Grigware, Clark, Gideon and one other "lifer" whose name I do not now recall that he had a plan for a "getaway" he found willing, not to say eager, listeners.

Murdock was employed in the carpenter shop. Working secretly at odd moments this artist had at the end of four months' tedious labor, made seven perfect dummy revolvers out of ordinary wood, painted black. The bullets were also of wood, and were burnished to give them the appearance of lead.

A few days later at breakfast in the mess hall Murdock yawned and stretched his arms above his head. With eighteen hundred men present the fact that one of them yawned and stretched attracted no particular attention. But to every man concerned in the plot it was the most momentous yawn they had ever known. It signified that all was in readiness and that the first engine which shunted freight into the yard of the institution after that time was the one to be seized. After the freight car was uncoupled the engine always gave one whistle as a signal to the guard stationed at the gate to open it to let the engine out. For many years freight cars had been shunted into the yard in this manner to be unloaded.

Waiting for the Whistle That Meant—What?

Each of the men concerned in the plot worked in a different shop. As they started to work after breakfast on this particular morning each had concealed in his blouse one of the dummy guns with its wooden bullets. There followed two hours of suspense, during which, with every quivering nerve at highest tension, the men waited for the telltale whistle. Suppose it should be only a light whistle? Suppose the sound of the shop machinery should drown it out? Suppose the plot had been known for weeks and the prison officials were patiently waiting in the yard for the break to be made? Suppose——

A shrill, piercing whistle, a simultaneous commotion in each of the shops where the men worked, a gray racing figure bounding past the shop guard like a streak of light and seven determined men were racing to a common point, the cab of the engine. Did it ever take so long to run so short a distance? The first to reach the goal was Gideon. He thrust his harmless gun into the engineer's face, who promptly leaped for the ground, closely followed by his fireman. The other prisoners piled into the cab. With a vicious wrench Hewitt pulled the throttle wide open and the engine tore through the open gateway at breakneck speed out into the open country. But they were not yet out of danger. There was a derailing switch built outside the gate for just such an emergency. Deputy Warden Lemon rushed out of his office, built in the center of the prison yard, raced to the switch and threw it over. He was ten seconds too late. The engine passed the switch at thirty miles an hour and picking up speed.

The prison siren began its wailing scream, notifying the country for miles around of the escape and the usual reward for recapture. And of the seven—irony of ironies—Gideon was brought back at the point of an unloaded gun in the hands of a neighboring farmer boy, fourteen years old.

An outstanding feature of this plot was that seven prisoners were planning it together over a period of months, during which time under the "rule of silence" they were neither permitted to talk nor correspond with any other prisoner but their cellmate, and then only at night after being locked in. How, then, did they accomplish their conspiracy? By the prisoner's "wireless" which every man learns in institutions where the rule of silence is in force.

Prison Table Etiquette And Empty Cups

One of their methods is to talk into an empty cup while sitting next to each other at the dinner table. They have developed to an unusual degree the ability to talk through the corners of their mouths without moving their lips. This is the familiar stunt made much of by vaudeville performers when imitating criminals and other denizens of the underwould. In this way one often manages to talk to another in the yard. And their procedure for making an engagement is the "punch paper" code. This consists of punching pinholes through the words of a newspaper which are needed to make up a message. For instance, if Murdock wanted to talk to Grigware he would punch a pinhole through the words "Stand next to me to-morrow." The paper was passed to Grigware through the prison "underground." He would then hold the paper up to the electric bulb in his cell and pick out the words through which the light showed.

Another of the "wireless" methods is to communicate by tapping with the fingers when sufficiently close. Sometimes prisoners manage to plant notes in various parts of the prison which would be picked up by the intended recipient. This practice of "shooting" contraband notes is known among prisoners as "flying a kite." They are clever enough to put these notes in code, so that if they should be found by any of the guards they would be meaningless. Such codes are in general use by prisoners everywhere. Just a short time ago, while making a prison investigation, I picked up a note written in this code. Together with some of the officers I worked over it for several hours and by using the word "prison" as a base, feeling sure that this word would be used somewhere in the message, we finally decoded it.

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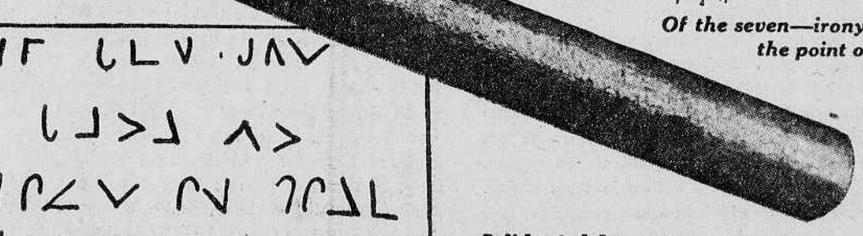
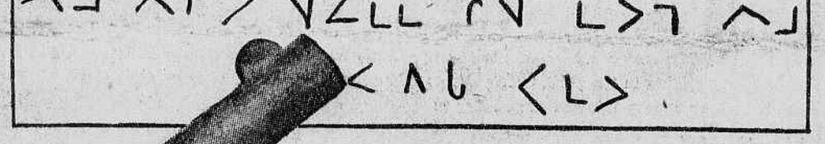


Solid steel bar cut in two by a thread from a prisoner's woolen sock. He dipped the thread in glue and rolled it in emery powder, thus giving it a sawlike edge



An intercepted message in convict code. Decoded, it reads: "See Shorty. Get him plant two guns on prison farm at base of oak tree at end of pig pen."

So many and so effective are the ways devised by prisoners to controvert the rule of silence that prison officials gradually came to recognize its uselessness, and although it was continued until quite recently it has finally been abandoned.

A prisoner confined in an asylum for the criminal insane in Washington molded a beautiful gun out of a piece of kitchen soap, covering it with finely polished tin foil to give it the appearance of silver mounting. Luckily the officers of the institution "disarmed" him before he could carry out his plan to escape. This prisoner had been a tramp, or "blanket stiff," as they are known among the denizens of the underworld. It had probably never occurred to him to look upon soap as other than an offensive weapon. This perhaps may have been the germ of his idea.

"Snitches" and "Stool Pigeons," And the Rule of Silence

The rule of silence, touched upon previously, was not primarily for the purpose of punishing the prisoners and making them feel that they were different from other men. Its purpose was to prevent organization, an old and generally correct theory of prison administration being that the safety of a prison depended upon the lack of organization among the prisoners. It was generally thought that organization could be prevented if the prisoners were prohibited from talking. Of course, the prisoners outnumber the officers many times over and the old idea was that if they ever acted in concert they would sweep all before them. And they would.

But it was not the rule of silence which operated to prevent organization, but certain of the prisoners themselves. In school they would be known by the descriptive "tattle tale." In prisons they are designated "snitches," "snakes" or "stool pigeons." In plain words, they are sneaks of the same kind you meet in everyday life, those who endeavor to "stand in" with their superiors by blabbing about others. They are far more numerous in prison than elsewhere, and they are hated by the other prisoners when they are known with a bitterness which is indescribable.

I say "when they are known." The "snitch" is careful to see that he does not become known. When a prisoner tells you he is going to "get" another because he "done the big squeal" you can make up your mind that he feels he has been thoroughly outraged and that the "snitch" had better "keep his eye on his number." The officers of all penal institutions take every advantage of the "snitch" and of his ability to remain unsuspected. It is this class of prisoner which prevents organization among his fellows, because they never know whom to trust and whom to suspect. A thoroughly detestable class, they have nevertheless prevented many escapes and saved the lives of numberless prison officials. Every prison official has his "stool pigeons," who keep him informed as to what is going on in his institution. The eagerness with which he uses them is only exceeded by the contempt in which he holds them.

Personally I do not by any means condemn the "snitch" system. On the contrary, I think that as our penal institutions are at present conducted it is absolutely indispensable. I realize that I lay myself open to the charge of theorists and moralists that I am upholding the development of sneaks and hypocrites. Theoretically it's indefensible. Practically it is not only defensible, it is essential to prevent escapes and protect lives. But, you say, we don't have to have "snitches" in everyday life. Of course, we don't. But men in everyday life are not living unnatural lives under a system of repression as they are in penal institutions. And where they do you'll have the